DAVID WARK GRIFFITH, MOTION PICTURE IDEALIST

Remarkable Personality of Man Who Made 'The Birth of a Nation' Revealed in Unusual Interview—Born in Kentucky, He Came to New York Twenty-five Years Ago and Realized His Ambition by Developing the Cinema Play

By WILLIS STEELL.

"IF a boy hungering for knowledge back in the hills of Kentucky twenty-five years ago had been able to see for 5 or 10 cents a real ocean, with real waves breaking on the strand, or scenes from the daily life of a great city, or actual pictures of far distant Cathay, how he would have thrilled to the sight, how much he would have learned, how broad would have grown his vision!"

This is what David Wark Griffith, producer of motion pictures, exclaimed about that "new form of expression," the cinema, which has come, he said, to revolutionize in a simple and natural way a world grown somewhat indifferent to its ancient teachers. He said it with no intention of defending the "movies," which, he thinks, need no defence, but to bring to minds filled to repletion and indifference with reflections of familiar scenes some notion of what the cinema carries to the prairie and the desert.

The boy to whom impersonally Mr. Griffith referred was himself, so he spoke from the heart, and sincerely, of what he believes the motion picture is able to do for other boys similarly situated. It was as far as he cared to go in the path of personal revelation while a very informal conversation went on the other day in his studio at Mamaroneck. And he seemed to be quite as sincere when he added that people wouldn't be keen to read any further revelations.

The public, remembering "The Birth of a Nation," "Intolerance," "Hearts of the World," "Way Down East"—to instance but a moiety of his product—believe that they have in him a maker of pictures whose chief, if not sole, purpose is not to grind out money from their pockets but who aims to give them a degree of what for lack of a better name is called literature.

The "people" in spite of Verlaine and a great grist of common producers of books, plays, moving pictures; in spite of the vulgar enemies of every form of art expression who for lucre would keep them still the "people," love literature and in some vague but honest way are moved by it. So because Mr. Griffith has become a purveyor of this thing they love he is a personality worth writing about.

Resembles the Finest Type Of the Educated Englishman

The man from Kentucky looks, acts, talks like anything but a man from Kentucky or what without *arriere pensee* one imagines a Kentucky bred man should be. Carefully dressed but in the latest inconspicuous fashion, retiring in manner but forceful in expression, he makes one think not of an American at all, but of the finest type of Englishman. His voice is rich and deep, recalling that of Forbes Robertson, but he exhibits not even the few traits of the stage characteristic of that famous actor. Although for a brief couple of years he was an actor, it was not from any love of the mimetic art but undertaken as a carefully thought out part of his own development.

His head, with a full cranial range, and his face, blue eyed, long nosed and a long upper lipped mouth combining lines indicative of decision and sentiment, recalls an English type frequently seen at the great English universities. This writer has met several of the fellows of Oxford and Cambridge, delightful, sophisticated men, singularly different from the accepted bulldog Englishman of caricature, and he thought of them while he was talking to his own countryman. A question brought out the denial that Mr. Griffith had lived long in England. In spite of birth and environment this man has in fact developed along racial lines.

For he comes from English ancestry on both sides. The Wark which is part of his patronymic comes from Welsh forebears, the Griffith who started the family going here left England in the beginning of the nineteenth century and fought in the war of 1812; his mother's family had longer been domiciled in Virginia. She was a Carter and among her ancestors numbers the "King" Carter of legend, a friend of Fairfax and Washington, while another married Lady Mary Montague and brought that celebrated belle of her day to Virginia as Henry Esmond had brought his lovely but somewhat elderly bride. The Shirley-Carter homestead, built in 1619, still stands beside the Potomac, one of the oldest homesteads of America.

Fit Mentally and Physically For Any Self-Made Task

David Wark Griffith looks like a man in the best of health, completely fit for any exertion, physical or mental, he sets for himself; full, indeed, of surplus energy, hard muscled, spare and enduring. He doesn't play much, has no golf or billiards, no indoor games. He likes long walks and shares the opinion of a former British Prime Minister that the outside of a horse is the best thing for the inside of a man. Also he looks as completely competent, discerning, clear headed and resourceful as a man could be.

"I am always busy," said he. "I direct everything myself, leaving to an understudy only a thing like a 'flash back,' but amid all details of whatever occupation I try to keep myself fit."

Calm and masterful, but reasonable, withal, swayed by impulses that are nevertheless kept sternly in leash, ready to engage the right actor for his purposes and as ready to discharge the wrong one, he can be stern and yet is capable of kindliness. In sum, the impression he left is that of a man economical of himself, of his resources and of his actions.

"I'm not a college man," said Mr. Griffith, "and the fundamentals of such education as I gained came from the village school 'way back in La Grange in Oldham county, Ky., where I was born in 1880. It wasn't burdensome. But there were influences in our home that urged me beyond these small beginnings.

"My father, 'Old Thunder Jake,' was all soldier, but he had a profound respect for what he called 'book knowledge.' He fought in the Mexican war and was Brigadier-General in the First Kentucky Cavalry in the war between the States. In his book on Kentucky Col. Polk Johnson declares that my father was the first officer who ever directed a cavalry charge in a buggy. Badly wounded in a previous engagement, he had to go on the field this way or not at all. Rough soldier as he was, he never forgot the refining influences of our old home in Virginia.

Praises His Sister Mattie For Influence in Boyhood

"But it was to my sister Mattie that I looked and never failed to receive encouragement in my efforts for self-improvement and in my ambitions. It is difficult to imagine nowadays how straitened we were in Kentucky for the means of improvement. She remembered, though, the lyceums, the lectures, the library societies of Virginia, and the refining help of these half sad recollections she endowed me with. I owe her so great a debt that I wish there was some way to repay it, but she left us long ago.

"Well, what do you think my ambitions were? I aspired to be a playwright. That sounds absurd as the ambition of a Kentucky farm boy, eh? All the same I kept the hope constantly in mind. I used to try to write a play after I had got my first job. It was on a country newspaper in Smithville, Ky."

"What did you write for the paper?"

Mr. Griffith laughed his deep, short laugh and lighted another cigarette.

"I never got as far as writing anything for it," said he; "my job was to run the hand press and to wrap up papers, mixed with hunting out the subscribers and gathering in the wood and green stuff, eggs, &c., which they gave up in payment. I remember vividly how I used to hope they might pay in fresh killed chickens!

"For this first job I was paid $1 a week and my board. From here I graduated to a second newspaper job with a man who ran what he called a 'syndicate.' It consisted of three country papers, one of them being the *Baptist Record*. He gave me a little more in wages and occasionally he let me write a short piece for the paper.

"All the time I was growing up I thought of when I should get away and come East. New York, without being aware of it, beckoned to me. As 19 I sold my bicycle, my brother gave me a small sum of money, enough for a railway ticket, and East I came. I landed in Jersey City with $15.

Went First to Brooklyn, Believing It Was Manhattan

"Once off the train I didn't know where to go, and I was almost too shy to ask how to cross over to New York. When I did feel bold enough to inquire of a ferryman he must have misunderstood me, for I went on a ferryboat that took me to Brooklyn. But I thought it was New York, and walked about every day for a week staring at the wonders of what I took for the metropolis. Finally I woke up.

"The $15 wouldn't last forever. I wasn't so green as to think it would, so I came over to New York and set about finding a job. I went to the newspapers first of all, but it seemed they were all letting men go, but I sold some things to THE NEW YORK HERALD just the same and got a few dollars.

"It was the fall of the year and somebody told me I looked like an actor, and why not try to be one? I did try all the managers, but for several weeks to no purpose. I wasn't too discouraged, strange as it must seem, but kept on trying to write things and to sell them.

"Then one day I got an acceptance from the *Cosmopolitan Magazine* of a poem I had submitted. I opened the letter on the subway and it is a mercy that I didn't jump out while the train was in motion, my excitement was so great. The check enclosed by a strange coincidence was for precisely the sum of money I brought to the city—that is, $15. But it looked to me as big as the Woolworth Building.

"A little later I sold a story, and all the time I was writing plays. One day in the Public Library I read in a book by Pinero that the way to train one's self to write a play was to become an actor. I remembered what had been said about my looking like one and I started another round of the managers' offices. This time I was successful; I was engaged at a tiny salary as an all round spear carrier in the Walker Whiteside company. He was playing Shakespearian repertoire and I was the *Messenger from Sicyon*, and similar characters not of vast importance.

"A couple of seasons with McKee Rankin and Nance O'Neil in plays by Shakespeare and Ibsen followed and concluded my actual actor experience. For now I had another string to my poor bow; I had started to write scenarios for the movies, then coming into great prominence. It was in 1902 or 1903 that I sold my first scenario for $15, and that was another 'greatest moment in my life.'

"These were the days when 500 feet of reel meant a big picture. If it ran ten minutes it was an event. The business of writing these things absorbed me; I wrote easily 350 or 400, and I sold four or five at prices varying from $5 to $15 each. Most of my sales were made to the Biograph, which had the field 'cinched' and was almost without a rival. My connection with the company through my little scenarios led me to try for a job of acting in them; I got it.

"My chance in the movies," said the now famous director, "came when in the progress of making a picture a director fell sick. It was known that I had written some scenarios that the 'big people' had sort of liked and that I had been a 'real' actor. I was permitted to try my hand and I did finish the picture satisfactorily.

"Then I had my second chance, which was to produce my own piece called 'The Adventures of Dolly'—sounds like comedy, doesn't it? By no means, I was too new to write comedy and this piece was built up on situations of tragedy. It needed an actor who could both look and act like a gentleman—who, in fact, was one. Here chance again helped me. I had sought in vain for what I wanted when I saw in the outer room of a manager's office the actor I wanted. I followed him out into the street and accosted him, asking him if he didn't want to go into the movies. He wasn't keen about it, but I persuaded him to try. The 'big' figure I was able to offer him was $5 a day. I won't name him, but this man is now one of the recognized figures in movie land.

Small Scale of the Cinema When It First Started

"The wages I was allowed to offer him corresponded to the small and even penurious methods then existing in making a picture. A director in those days was supposed to do in three or four days what we would now take a year to accomplish. To give you an example, I took my little company up to a New England village for the purpose of making a picture and was allowed exactly $50 for all expenses, including their board and my own. Our expenses came to that occult sum that followed me all through my beginnings, $15 more than the allowance, and this I advanced out of my own pocket. I am not sure that I was reimbursed, but didn't care, for that particular picture was a success.

"In my novitiate I made the picture of Mary Pickford as 'The Violin Maker of Cremona,' 'Ingomar,' 'Merchant of Venice,' 'Sands of Dee,' writing all the versions myself. I was a sort of universal tinkerer in dramatic things, like Nicholas Nickleby.

"It took long argument and much persuasion to convince the people 'at the top' that real money must be spent to keep the people coming to the movies. Their answers used to be something like this: 'We can get 'em just by showing a horse eating in a meadow or a railway train running across the film. Why should we spend money for all the foolishly expensive things you want to do?'

"Then, too, a film of 800 or 900 feet that ran ten minutes served about the limit of their desires. In order to get one that should run twenty-five minutes accepted and run out, I was compelled to divide a picture into two parts, calling one 'His Trust,' and the other 'His Trust Fulfilled.' This was the first movie serial.

"My next attempted innovation, a two reel picture, aroused even more opposition; I was accused of attempting to upset the business.

"However, we did go on making progress. 'Judith of Bethulia,' 'The Escape,' 'The Battle,' 'The Conscience' were all progressive, and the first named was the first four reel film ever turned out in this country. A five reel film was accomplished a little later by a sort of subterfuge. It was 'Home, Sweet Home,' based on Payne's song, but made up of five separate stories.

"The Birth of a Nation" Idea Came From Company Member

"Then came the project of making a film version of 'The Birth of a Nation.' It has been incorrectly stated that Thomas Dixon, author of the book which contained the germ of the story, brought it to me; instead, a member of my company then playing in another picture gave me the book and said he thought it would make a movie. I read the book and agreed with him. When we started to produce this film we had no intention to make it a full evening's entertainment, but as it progressed we hated to cut. My best argument for preserving all of it was drawn from seeing a quite inferior play getting the people into a Broadway theatre at $2.50 per head. I said if people would give up for that show they would certainly pay $2 to see ours. And so the great experiment was made.

"'The Birth of a Nation' made a tremendous fortune for the men who invested in it. It paid me only my salary, and eventually it was the cause of my losing my job.

I thought as the piece had been so great a success that in future outputs I ought to have in addition to salary a small percentage of the profits.

"They laughed at me, saying, 'You are only a cog in a big machine, and if the cog gets out the machine will run along quite as smoothly.' So the cog—that's me—got out.

"With the Triangle, to whom I went, it seemed to me I did my best work, although few people have every heard of my earlier pictures made for this company. One of these was 'True Heart Susie.' When it was shown in England I had a letter from Queen Alexandra, now the Dowager Queen, complimenting me on the excellence of the pictures and on their nearness to life. Let me define what I mean by saying some of my best work is shown in this picture; I really mean that it contains the best photographs ever made for the film.

"'Intolerance' was the next step, and it was intended to duplicate the triumph of 'The Birth of a Nation.' It didn't. It was a mistake. It was too new and its appeal could not be universal, besides being more depressing than hopeful. Shortly after its inception I told the men who had invested in it as a separate corporation of my doubts, but they pooh-poohed me and urged me to go on with the picture. Without counting my salary, which I put in the gamble along with their money, this gigantic film cost $1,700,000.

"Was there a holler when it failed to score? I pray to be saved from hearing another like it. The holler was effective, too, for I took over the losses of the investors and have been paying up the notes I signed ever since.

"'Way Down East' has been a triumph. Probably that result is not surprising, for the picture follows a telling and sympathetic story. One scene in it, the escape of the heroine on an ice floe, has brought up a discussion in which some persons affirm that this particular picture is a faked one.

"It was taken at White River Junction on the Connecticut River, near Dartmouth College, and we could call nearly all the boys of that college as witnesses of the realism of the picture, for they spent the greater part of every day on the banks of the river watching us while we worked. A force of 150 men had to be employed to assist in getting the effect we wanted, as the floe had to be forced and the way we did it was to dynamite the ice below the fall. There were lots of escapes in the making of that picture which do not appear in it and we all got wet over and over again in attempting to realize our ideal.

"As you ask me what kind of subjects in pictures are what in the profession are called 'sure fire,' I may refer you to this one, 'Way Down East,' which simply couldn't fail. Another that we are making now here in Mamaroneck belongs in the same category. It is 'The Two Orphans.' In driving up to this office, which was formerly the country home of Henry M. Flagler, you could not have failed to see the Paris street we have built. While it looks very old or as being a replica of a vanished street of old Paris, similar streets lasted in the French capital, like the Rue de la Lune, long after the city had been Hausmannized."

In 1917 Mr. Griffith was appointed by the British Department of War Propaganda to take charge of all cinema men for the Allies. Armed with personal papers signed by David Lloyd George and the Earl of Derby, he spent months on the front lines and was often in No Man's Land, beyond the lines and within thirty yards of the lines of the Germans. Through that first critical year Brig.-Gen. Crawford worked with him daily and a great deal of his work of picture making was done while under fire.

Technically, the cinema is continuing to make progress in Mr. Griffith's opinion. Cameras are being improved and these improvements are being more rapidly made in this country than abroad. There was a time, he commented, when the really fine cameras came from Europe. Now the producer has a choice of several of American make that in certain respects are superior to those made in Europe. While it seemed to the producer that these mechanical things had about touched perfection, he disliked to put a period to improvement by prophecy.

"Technically, we are coming nearer and nearer to our ideal and it will have to be admitted by all save those who are prejudiced unfairly that the work turned out by the various studios is also improving in character as an art product and as an educator.

"How could it be otherwise? The movies in their beginnings did not make a loud call to brains. They do so now. The best brains of the land are now assisting in their evolution. Still are to be found traces of brainless, even silly, production for which there is no excuse to be found, even in the fact that they continue—these senseless and improbable concoctions—to please a type of low intellect. But pictures of this kind are becoming less and less for the very good reason that they do not pay.

"When I say that the movies are calling to them the best brains I mean just that. I do not know of any great and accepted writer of fiction who does not see his opportunity to extend his influence by this attractive medium. To prove this I need only instance Wells, Barrie, Kipling among the Englishmen and Rex Beach and Rupert Hughes among our own novelists. The latter two by themselves going into the direction of their stories are on the right track.

"It is not necessary in the face of staring facts to add that no actor has proved too great for the movies. And it would surprise you to be told how many applications we have here weekly from people well known in society who would like to become associated either as actors or in some capacity in the work of picture making. The daughter of William J. Bryan has gone into directing moving pictures seriously and she and her father paid us a visit here for the purpose of getting assimilable ideas and criticism of a film she had made."

From what had gone before the questioner of the poetic, literary producer who had admitted that his greatest ambition remained what it had been in his boyhood 'way back in La Grange, Ky., to live on a farm and write plays, felt no trepidation in asking a question as he might have done had the interview proceeded differently. Then he might have anticipated an answer made up of a lot of trite and obvious things.

Here is the question:

"Now tell me with perfect candor, heart to heart and soul to soul, what do you really think of the movies?"

His Real Idea of Movies Expressed in Deep Sincerity

With deep seriousness Mr. Griffith replied:

"The moving picture is a form of expression as powerful but more alert and agile than the printed word. The power of the latter for good and evil has never been denied. No more can the power of the moving picture. It speaks more easily and more universally than any other form of expression. Is it an art form? Yes. And as it can show what great painting cannot, a tree with branches and leaves moving in the wind, it reaches closer to nature.

"The moving picture instructs, while it may delight. It carries an idea to the brain as the common vision cannot do with more swiftness and with greater fidelity than the eye of the ordinary man can gain from his own observation of nature. Its scenes being taken away from their context, so to speak, are revealed with a deeper truth to the gazer.

"Since the world itself is but a vision, an outgrowth of thought and idea, the value of the moving picture as a translator into simple units is not to be measured. It is immeasurable. The whole world is embraced by the scope of the movie and all the peoples in it. Everywhere it has spread without any propaganda. And it has just begun its true work, which is to teach. It is bound to have a tremendous future."

Another man would have ended this long sentence breathlessly. The producer spoke it calmly, slowly, with here and there a pause, with folded arms and arms that unfolded and permitted a hand to reach out for a "fag."

What was evident was his heartfelt belief in the truth of what he said. There isn't a little bit of a chance that he will quit the movies and write those dreamed of plays.

WHAT MR. GRIFFITH THINKS OF CENSORS.

As to a censorship of moving pictures my opinion is divided. I hope never to direct a picture myself which I should fear to show to the censor, but there should be, I think, discrimination shown between pictures intended to be shown to children, and those intended for grownup children often take a wrong cast or may do so from something that is not intended to give it. Screens meant for them should be most closely scrutinized.

With persons of age to understand the case is different. They are not apt to read into a picture evil which does not exist there, and there are certain themes, harmful perhaps to children, which would prove quite harmless, even innocuous, to their fathers and mothers.

Yes, you may write me down as saying that I do not favor censorship of screen pictures meant for an adult audience. If the theme of such a picture is immoral it may safely be left to the police. The law is powerful enough to stop its circulation. But I am all for protecting the little ones. I am married, but haven't any children of my own; the latter disability doesn't keep me from a stern wish to guard the morals of the young so that they may develop rightly.